

United states involvement in the vietnam war history essay

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Kira Tsougarakis April 29th, 2013 It's June 1971, and the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War has spilled into a third decade. Thousands of US soldiers are dead, and still more protesting on the home front are asking why. But to the nation's surprise, the Pentagon itself had already asked that question and many others years earlier- and had not publicly disclosed the answers. However, on June 13th, 1971, the New York Times began to publish portions of a study conducted by the Department of Defense entitled United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967. Known as the Pentagon Papers, this study presented a different version of the war than had originally been presented to the public, and contradicted statements made about the war by Presidents Johnson and Kennedy. The release of the Pentagon Papers was a colossal event that incensed the public, undermined the confidence of Americans in their leaders and, ultimately, facilitated the end of the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. America's involvement in that conflict began in the 1950s as a way to contain the spread of communism. The North Vietnamese government and Viet Cong were fighting to reunify Vietnam under communist rule, and the US viewed involvement in the war as a way to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam.[1] American involvement began slowly, escalating in the early 1960s so that by the time the war ended, more than half a million American soldiers had served in Vietnam.[2] Not surprisingly for a foreign war that did not pose a direct threat to Americans living at home, the Vietnam War was the object of a significant anti-war movement that had an enormous impact on national consciousness while also forming one of the most divisive forces in twentieth century U. S. history.[3] The divisiveness hit its peak in the late

1960s and early 1970s when the anti-war movement began to influence not only peace but also ordinary citizens and political leaders. Attracting college students, the middle class, and labor union workers, the movement became prominent in 1965 (after the United States began bombing North Vietnam in earnest), peaked in 1968, and continued fervently throughout the conflict.

[4]As public discontent with decisions made by the government increased, the war seemed, to many, to accomplish nothing other than losing innocent lives to what seemed like a hopeless cause.[5]The antiwar movement exposed a deep split within 1960s American society; expressions of this movement ranged from nonviolent protests to radical displays of violence. One of these was demonstration. The situation hit a boiling point in May of 1970 when, an unarmed group of student protesters at Kent State University were shot at, leaving four dead and nine wounded. The Kent State shooting was a major turning point for public opinion in the Vietnam War.[6]After this event shook the country, dissent ruled America; the antiwar cause was established. It was in this environment that the Pentagon Papers were released; the equivalent of throwing gasoline on a fire. The Pentagon Papers were a collection of highly confidential US government studies that traced the history of the US involvement in Vietnam. The study was ordered by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in June 1967, having been written for more than a year by a team of experts with access to confidential documents. It showed that influential leaders, including presidents and military officers, had miscalculated the risks of involvement in Vietnam.[7]In public statements, the government had been distorting the U. S role throughout the country for years. It soon became clear from the Pentagon

Papers that all the US Presidents whose terms coincided with the Vietnam War had lied about the war to the public. The Pentagon Papers were published in 1973, when Richard Nixon was President and when public support for continued US involvement in the Vietnam War was steadily eroding.[8]When the public understood the extent of the misstatements made by public officials, particularly, about the active role the US government had taken in the conflict, there was outrage. Though the study did not cover the policies of Nixon's administration, the information in it was embarrassing for his administration, especially since Nixon was up for reelection the following year.[9]Consequently, when it became apparent that the release of the papers also posed a threat to the current administration, the Justice Department requested a temporary restraining order to prevent the Times from publishing the entire set of papers. This served to exacerbate the public's mistrust of elected officials who were shown as not only willing to lie to the public about the war, but also willing to go to great lengths to cover up their lies. The president himself even referenced the widespread distrust toward the American government when he said: " Some of our citizens have become accustomed to thinking that whatever our Government says must be false . . . as far as this war is concerned." [10]And, of course, in addition to the keen mistrust of government, the public's distaste for this increasingly unpopular war reached epic proportions. The Pentagon Papers' publication, and its subsequent termination, culminated in an escalation of anti-war activities and led to the embarrassment of many American political and military leaders. Two schools of thought emerged. Those people who long harbored suspicions about an untrustworthy

government were proven right by the publication of the Pentagon Papers. These people were antiwar and anxious to see the Vietnam War end. The second school of thought consisted of those, although few, who believed in the war and believed that the publication of the Pentagon Papers hurt the war effort. The perceived manipulation by the Nixon Administration of the First Amendment right to free speech further divided the American people between those who were angered about what they saw as the crackdown on the exercise of free speech and those who viewed the publication of the Pentagon Papers as irresponsible and even libelous. All these events spurred the antiwar movement once again, and the weight of public opinion became so great that Nixon had no choice but to eventually bend to it. In January of 1973, a truce was signed and U. S. troops began to withdraw from Vietnam. [11]The vigorous antiwar movement that effectively shaped the public mind forced the government into action, changing the outcome of the Vietnam War.

Other References

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